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ABSTRACT

Based on 134 undergraduate student responses to two dilemmas, one concerning Affirmative Action programs and the second concerning minority student admission to college, it was discerned that these students largely held viewpoints that were consistent with conceptions of a "uniform" culture as opposed to conceptions of diversity and pluralism. In addition, there was a note of pessimism throughout many of the responses, suggesting that little could ultimately be done about racial prejudice and discrimination. The problem, then, was to attempt to develop a learning program adaptable in the college classroom that could address issues of diversity and pluralism phrased in the "language of possibility." A three-step learning cycle is described that used recent research and writing in narrative and critical thinking processes. The steps involved: (1) narrative development of students' personal "dilemmas;" (2) facilitating structural connections between individual experience, structures of knowledge, and the structure of society; and (3) intergroup relations and cooperative learning, linking individual identity and the social structures of culture to cooperative learning and conflict resolution. Thirteen references are included. (Author/TE)

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TEACHING DIVERSITY THROUGH PLURALISM: A MODEL FOR TEACHING ABOUT RACISM

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ABSTRACT: Based on student responses to two dilemmas, one concerning Affirmative Action programs and the second concerning minority student admissions to college, it was discerned that students largely held viewpoints that were consistent with conceptions of a "uniform" culture as opposed to conceptions of diversity and pluralism. In addition, there was a certain note of pessimism throughout many of the responses suggesting that little could ultimately be done about racial prejudice and discrimination. The problem, then, was to attempt to develop a learning program adaptable in the college classroom that could address issues of diversity and pluralism phrased in the "language of possibility". A three step learning cycle is proposed using recent research and writing in narrative and critical thinking processes.

BACKGROUND: There is currently a national debate over cultural literacy as well as the ethnic and racial awareness of American college students (Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1986). One of the most significant issues (but also largely underplayed) is the relationship of historical literacy to the development of social interest of students. As people of color become a larger and larger force in the economic fate of our culture, it would seem essential that the increasing knowledge base regarding ethnic/racial awareness also become more reflective. That is, ideally, education should not only increase the student's "storehouse" of facts but through critical thinking and reflective judgment bring an increasingly sophisticated level of understanding and concern.

PROBLEM: Our understanding of knowledge and concern with respect to ethnic/racial issues has shifted from a set of Assimilationalist attitudes to Pluralistic conceptions and attitudes. Yet many, if not most American college students, appear to have held on to the "value" of a common or even universal American culture. This set of Assimilationist attitudes seem to be part of our politically conservative educational agenda at practically every level of schooling. It is the expressed point of view of the authors that Pluralism, particularly Radical Pluralism, holds the greatest promise for the understanding of significant ethnic differences and contributions of various groups. Ultimately, social concern and social policy should be predicated upon the basis of Pluralism. The problem, therefore, is to encourage the level of reflection and critical thinking consistent with evaluating pluralistic solutions to ethnic/racial concerns in America.

PROCEDURES: As part of a project supported by the UWS Institute on Race and Ethnicity, 134 undergraduate students were presented with two Racial/Ethnic dilemmas. The first addressed Affirmative Action and its impact on American minorities. The second "dilemma" addressed outright grants and alternative criteria for the admission of minority students to universities. Responses were recorded and rated according to Assimilationist or Pluralistic attitudes. The instructions to students and the dilemmas presented were as follows:

Please and write with a paragraph or two on your thinking regarding the following concerns:

1. Affirmative Action is a program designed to correct the historical lack of opportunity for minorities in jobs as compared to non-whites. Some studies show that without such a program, discrimination, although illegal, will continue. Other studies say that this program is reverse discrimination because it provides jobs as the expense of non-minorities, thereby using race as a factor in deciding who gets hired.

2. There have been frequent reports on the decrease in the number of minority students attending college. Some suggestions for increasing enrollment are outright grants to replace student loans and exemptions from some restrictive college entrance requirements. Other educators including minority professors have stated that lowering standards gives a false idea of the skills necessary to succeed in college and therefore promotes greater failure on the part of minority students.

The first of the two paragraphs considered affirmative action and the question of "Reverse discrimination". The second paragraph was primarily concerned with the issue of providing incentives for minority students attending college. These "dilemmas" were chosen in as much as many students have had some possibility of personal experience with regard to issues that reflect future career issues and college entrance criteria. The construction of the paragraph also attempts to present the issue as a dilemma and thereby introduce competing viewpoints without judgment or implied conclusions of any kind.

The paragraphs were, in turn, rated for exemplifying either a stance of structural Pluralism or Assimilationalist attitudes. Structural Pluralism here is defined as the active acknowledgment of separate and distinct ethnic/racial identifications and subsequently the need to propose strategies to redress social inequities that are highly specific to particular groups and circumstances. Assimilationalist attidues, on the other hand, suggest the need to conform to a common or "universal" cultural experience and set of "American values". For a more complete discussion of this distinction between structural Pluralism and Assimilationalist attitudes the reader is referred the work of James Banks, Multiethnic Education: Theory and Practice, 1981.

RESULTS: The responses to the "dilemmas" represented both Pluralistic and Assimilationalist attitudes. Indeed, several written responses to the dilemma seem to change in "mid-stream" and end up representing a something of both positions. Some responses were highly articulate and others seemed more confused and even disinterested. Occasionally students would offer a personal experience in the form of an anedcote that supported their contentions. Here are some partial responses that represent the variety of answers given:

"I feel the best qualified should always get the job."
"Race shouldn't be a factor."
"I do not believe it is right to hire someone because of their race."
"Everyone has the same chances in college."
"Why do minorities think they are 'special'?"
"These are just people like myself and if they get special treatment I will be the one discriminated against."
"I have to take out loans to make it, why shouldn't a minority student?"
"Everyone is responsible for themselves."

These and similar responses largely characterize the paragraphs and can be seen as being consistent with an Assimilationalist position, i.e., there is a uniform culture and each separate individual experiences equal opportunities to share societal rewards. A rather unsuspected but quite frequent response was the belief that there would always be discrimination of some kind or another. Several students seemed very pessimistic about any sort of equitable solution.

There were also responses that represented a more Pluralistic perspective. These responses were much less frequent but seemed to acknowledge a greater understanding of ethnic diversity and the need for programs and solutions to historically embedded problems of racial inequality in America. Example comments include: "We need to reverse the effects of decades of discrimination."; "Maybe a little reverse discrimination isn't so wrong."; and "Special programs are needed to correct the lack of opportunities for minority groups."

It is our contention that the Assimilationalist perspective represents the "language of necessity" as opposed to Pluralism and the "language of possibility". Rather than prepare students for a uniform cultural landscape where necessity dictates an attitude that discrimination will always be with us (or the equally impoverished notion that racism no longer exists or is simply an individual matter), we would like to suggest a pedagogical approach based on Pluralism. Such an approach would hopefully create the potential for innovative solutions through the understanding of conflict and differences of historically embedded social problems.

What follows is a brief description of classroom teaching strategies that we have attempted to incorporate in a team taught course at UW-River Falls on Multicultural Counseling and Education:

CLASSROOM TEACHING STRATEGIES: The following strategies have been employed in classrooms where there is a need to "discover" the language of possibility particularly as applied to deeply embedded structural problems. In this particular case issues of racial and ethnic diversity and pluralism provided the course content. However, it is relatively easy to imagine other issues of a social, political or even more narrow disciplinary nature benefiting from this approach. It is also important to view this approach as a cycle of learning (perhaps more of a "spiral" than a cycle) in its implementation where the beginning point is the individual that expands to include the entire class and returns once again in narrative form to the individual.

The classroom cycle of learning includes the following steps:

Step One: Narrative Development of "Dilemmas".

In discussing the substantial nature of the narrative experience Polkinghorne (1986) states:

"The products of narrative schemes are ubiquitous in our lives: they fill our cultural and social environment. We create narrative descriptions for ourselves and for others about our own past actions, and we develop storied accounts that give sense to the behavior of others. We also use the narrative scheme to inform our decisions by constructing imaginative 'what if' scenarios." (p. 14).

The starting point is with story, narrative and the personal experience of the student. That experience might be direct or indirect and circumstantial (as in the case of deriving opinions through second hand accounts and media images). In any respect it provides the point of departure. It is a truly integrative, if incomplete scenario as well as a highly subjective one. The initiating "dilemma" is integrated in the sense that it includes affective, conative and cognitive elements. All three elements are, in turn, necessary to engage and arouse the natural curiosity of the student as a prelude to critical thinking (Kurfiss, 1988). It is incomplete as the sotry typically lacks any connection to a more systematic evaluation of historical and societal structures.

Step Two: Facilitating Structural Connections

This second step in the cycle directly suggests a dialectical nature to individual identity through narrative (Step One) and the structure of society (Giroux, 1988). Using Giroux's terminology where the teacher, as intellectual, is engaged in linking human identity to the spheres of knowledge and concern (1988). Where intellectual pursuits are seen as the disconnected search for isolated facts, students will continue to view the intellectual process as an endeavor without personal meaning or relevance.

As college instructors we are well grounded in the intellectual investigations of structures of knowledge. Our disciplines inform us as to the methodologies for developing and expanding our knowledge base and that of students. The lectures, laboratory, library and field research procedures are so well known to us that no discussion of them here

seems necessary (and differs according to discipline so that no discussion could approach any semblance of completeness). It is important to reinforce, at this step, that the intellectual investigation must go beyond the world of "fact" and establish links to the students' narrative experience. First the narrative or dilemma is constructed prior to the didactic readings and lectures that so dominate our education experience.

In Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind (Belenky, et.al., 1986) a distinction is made between "banker-teachers" and "mid-wife" teachers. This relationship best expresses the instructor's role in this step as the authors state:

"Many women expressed . . . a belief that they possessed latent knowledge. The kind of teacher they praised and the kind for which they yearned was one who would help them articulate and expand their latent knowledge: a mid-wife teacher. Mid-wife teachers are the opposite of banker-teachers. While the bankers deposit knowledge in the learner's head, the mid-wives draw it out. They assist the students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it." (p. 217).

The central concern at this point is to use the narrative dilemmas along a basis for a serious structural investigation and analysis of race, gender and class in american education and culture. Here personal and individual subjectivities are linked with social and structural conditions as they exist in the environment (Bromley, 1989). Issues of identity are not isolated from intellectual pursuits.

Step Three: Intergroup Relations and Cooperative Learning.

The final step in this three stage learning model attempts to raise the link between individual identity and the social structures of culture to the context of what Alfred Adler called Social Interest. Social interest is understood to be the willingness of the individual to confront tasks and engage in activities with respect to enhancing the welfare of others (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, and Sperry, 1987). Small cooperative learning groups (four to five members) convene to consider conflict resolution approaches within the framework of "possibility" rather than the narrow restrictions of "necessity" (Johnson and Johnson, 1975).

The literature and research on Cooperative learning as a set of classroom interventions has been well documented and reviewed elsewhere (Friessen and Wieler, 1988). The focus here is not simply to increase academic achievement but to facilitate intergroup interaction and cooperation. It is here that the group merges personal subjectivities and structural investigation to create applied solutions to problems and concerns. The promotion of a unitary group consensus is difficult especially for many college students used to a more individualistic, competitive learning environment.

This third step represents learning through small group interaction and doing. In addition to the classroom cooperative learning group public service opportunities might also be incorporated here. Two cautions must first be mentioned. First, any such public service should be the result of step two and be a part of classroom experience. They should be linked in this way so that readings, service and subsequent analysis can be carefully interwoven activities. The second caution is voiced by Robert Coles (1989) as he states, "I would like to see students of all backgrounds with their teachers involved in the projects where we are all needed" (p. 20). Participation in service activities by both student and instructor seems essential.

CONCLUSIONS: An informal attempt was made to depict student attitudes toward two related racial/ethnic dilemmas. It was found that students largely expressed a uniform and somewhat pessimistic set of attitudes and assumptions regarding solutions to issues of social inequality in America. If a desired outcome of the educational process is to facilitate critical reasoning and enhance both fact-based knowledge and expressed concern for issues, than a teaching/learning model reflecting such should be examined. Offered here is a preliminary three step, interactive process based on recent research and writing in critical thinking, reflective judgment models and narrative processes (Kurfiss, 1987; Kitchener, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1986).

This model attempts to address three basic questions for college instructors in this area: First, what specific teaching/learning strategies can enhance students' awareness of racial diversity? Second, How should a curriculum attempt to change student attitudes toward diversity issues? and thirdly, What is the outcome or impact of a strategy based on pluralism on student knowledge, concern and propensity toward action? Now that such a preliminary model is proposed these questions need to be addressed through systematic assessment. Some combination of quanitative (knowledge based assessment) and qualitative (focused group interviews) might provide further clarification of the efficacy of this proposed model.

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